DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 054 406 AC 010 614

AUTHOR Hahn, Alan J.
TITLE Community Decision-Making Systems.
PUB DATE Nov 70
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Community Action; *Decision Making Skills; *Guidelines; *Participant Involvement

ABSTRACT

Aframework for understanding and working with local decision-making systems is provided. Guidelines are given in: (1) identifying the participants in the decision-making system; (2) determining the decision-making structure; and (3) following the stages in the process of decision-making. A list of typical participants includes people in local government, private general interests, nongovernmental agencies, private special interests, state and federal government, churches, labor unions, voluntary associations, and citizens (through voting, organization membership, and in crisis situations). The major types of decision-making structures are: mass participation, monolithic, polylithic, and pluralistic. Since monolithic and polylithic structures are the most common, they are further subdivided into cohesive, executive-centered, competitive, and fragmented structures. The 10 stages in the community decision-making process are: (1) interest recognition, (2) convergence of interest, (3) formulation of proposals and alternatives, (4) development of strategy, (5) organization of political support, (6) establishment of relationships with authoritative decision makers, (7) authoritative consideration, (8) decision, (9) policy implementation, and (10) interest recognition. A questionnaire for use in workshops is appended. (DB)

ED054406

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING SYSTEMS

Alan J. Hahn*

A convenient starting point in gaining an understanding of community decision-making systems is the image we tend to have of communities in the Good Old Days. Sometime in the past, communities were supposedly small, homogeneous, neatly bounded places where everyone knew one another, shared the same values, and found much less to disagree about than we seem to find today. I'm sure this image was less than accurate in many cases. The Good Old Days in the Old Home Town weren't exactly as good as we prefer to remember them.

Community Trends

Nevertheless, with this image, we have a good place to begin considering the things that have been happening to communities in the past few decades. This can be summarized in terms of four main trends:

(1) First of all, as communities have grown larger, class lines have developed or grown sharper. The result can be called vertical obstructions--that is, barriers in communication, understanding, and influence between higher and lower social and economic groups--between employers and employees, leaders and followers, the decision-makers and the decided-fors.

(2) A second trend, as the communities continued to grow still larger and more complex, is horizontal fragmentation. In other words, specialization has developed among groups, organizations, and agencies "across" the communities (as opposed to "up and down" differentiation in the case of vertical obstructions). Communication gaps have emerged here, too. Groups, organizations, and agencies have tended increasingly to work in their own specialized worlds, in mutual unawareness of relevant activity by other groups, organizations, and agencies.

(3) A third trend is external linkages. As groups have specialized within the local communities, they have simultaneously developed and elaborated connections with their specialized counterparts in other communities and at state and federal levels of government and social organization. Examples include state federations of local clubs and organizations and, perhaps most obviously, the increasingly important ties local governments have with state and federal levels for financial and other assistance.

(4) The final trend is, in many respects, a counter-trend to the first one (vertical obstructions)--namely, the increased pressure for participation. Obviously, much of this pressure is aimed at breaking down the barriers between higher and lower

*Assistant Professor, Consumer Economics and Public Policy, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. November 1970.

2818-A

AC010614

levels in the community. Several factors contribute to this pressure--the most obvious ones including increasing levels of education and the increasing role of the mass media, most notably television. For a variety of obvious reasons, educated people are both more interested in participating and better able to participate. TV and the other news media serve to demonstrate to nonparticipants what other people in other parts of the country are doing and accomplishing and, in a sense, provide models to imitate.

There's an element of tragedy in all this. More and more people are interested in participating, and effective participation is most easily accomplished at the local level. But, at the same time, because of the combination of horizontal differentiation and external linkages, the important decisions that seriously affect the quality of people's lives are increasingly made at higher and higher levels.

At the local level, the citizen is most likely to know his decision-makers and be able to contact them. He is most likely to confront issues that tend to have direct, immediate, comprehensible impacts on his life. And, at the local level, he is most likely to confront issues that are concrete and specific--something he can get his hands on. But the really significant decisions seem to be made at points farther and farther from his influence and control--by Big Business, Big Labor, Big Government, Big Science, and Big Technology. The citizen is increasingly faced with the dismal choice between the distance and impersonality of big institutions and the uselessness of local ones.

What Is Needed

What is needed are mechanisms for bringing together a diversity of appropriate individuals, groups, organizations, and agencies (a) to discuss rather concrete, specific problems of local concern, (b) to share--that is, express and understand--the diversity of perspectives on the problem, the diversity of feelings, opinions, and information, (c) to reconcile differences of opinion and interpretation, (d) to achieve a level of consensus sufficient to reveal a feasible course of action, (e) to plan appropriate strategies, and (f) possibly to direct strategies for dealing with the problem.

In recognition of the reality of decision-making at the local level, it is essential that the participants include representatives from <u>outside</u> as well as inside the locality--from higher levels of government and from neighboring localities, for example. It is also obvious that, frequently, the only course of action open to such local communities will be the requesting of help from higher levels. There aren't many important things localities can do for themselves <u>by</u> themselves any more. However, requests for assistance would surely carry much more weight than they do at present if they were backed by evidence of the kind of local decision-making mechanisms I am attempting to describe.

The overall objectives of these mechanisms would be related to the four community trends I outlined earlier: (1) to help overcome vertical obstructions by expanding effective communication between decision-makers and decided-fors; (2) to help overcome horizontal fragmentation by bringing together the variety of specialists who have something to contribute to the solution of the problem at hand; (3) to help maintain and strengthen external linkages with important resources outside the boundaries of the community in question; and (4) to help deal maturely and creatively with conflict.

Regarding the last point, it is fairly evident that, as increasing numbers of diverse groups are effectively involved in decision-making, levels of community conflict might be expected to increase--at least at the start. There would probably be more good than bad in this, but we don't seem to have a history of calm, reasonable, effective response to conflict. There's a lot to be learned.

A Framework

Now if all this is true, the question for me is: what should a political scientist do to facilitate the creation and operation of the mechanisms I have said we need to assist in the solution of local problems? My answer has been an attempt to provide a framework for understanding and working with local decision-making systems. The framework is a simple one, seeking to provide guidelines in (a) identifying the participants in the decision-making system--who they are and, also, who they ought to be, (b) determining the decision-making structure--that is, the patterns of acquaintance, communication, and influence among the participants, and (c) following the stages in the process of decision-making.

The remaining pages of this paper present a brief outline of this framework. I have developed and presented these ideas in considerably more detail elsewhere.

(A) Participants and Nonparticipants

Following is a list of categories of typical participants in community decision-making. The list is intended to suggest some of the individuals and groups in the community with whom fairly regular contact might be maintained by those who are seriously interested in helping improve local decision-making.

Community Decision-Making

PARTICIPANTS

1. Local Government

   elected officials

   administrators--department heads, various boards and commissions

   political party leaders

   public employees--teachers, social workers, etc.

   other local government units. These can't be ignored; they may be neighboring units, or they may be overlapping units--villages, towns, counties, for example.

2. Private General Interests--individuals and groups outside of government, but interested and influential in a wide range of community problems and issue-areas

   business

   industry

   financial institutions

   real estate

   public utilities

   news media

   professionals--lawyers, doctors, etc.

   farmers--in the more rural jurisdictions

   others

3. Nongovernmental Agencies--things like private schools, private hospitals, family counseling services, etc., etc.

4. Private Special Interests--individuals and groups outside of government, similar to the private general interests, but confining their interests and influence to one or a very few problems or issue areas; the PTA in education, for example, or an individual who only becomes active in conservation issues

5. State and Federal Government--obviously important, but sometimes surprisingly easy to overlook as participants in local decision-making

   agencies--provide funds, other kinds of assistance, and controls

   legislators) can frequently act as go-betweens
   political party leaders) between the locality and the higher levels

6. Other Groups

   churches) leaders (that is, clergymen and union leaders) often looked
   labor unions) to as spokesmen for the disadvantaged or the working man--
) but often lacking the full support of their followers (that
) is, congregations or rank-and-file membership)

   voluntary associations--great in number in most communities; some of them extremely important and influential; but many are mainly social and fraternal organizations with little effective role in community decision-making

7. Citizens-- not very frequent participants, except (a) through voting, (b) through membership in organizations that are influential as organizations, and (c) occasionally in crisis situations or when directly threatened (by urban renewal, highway construction, or a zoning ordinance, for instance)

It is impossible to talk about participation in community decision-making without also talking about nonparticipation. Estimates from several research projects suggest that participation in community affairs--aside from "low-effort" things like voting and contributing to the United Fund--is limited to well under 5% of the adult population.

Generalized complaining about the low levels of participation are probably a waste of time, however. Most people don't participate most of the time because they don't care about the issues, and I, for one, am neither surprised nor appalled by this. The problem is not simply that people don't participate, but that the people who should participate don't, can't, or won't when they should.

How do we know when they should? This is, of course, an impossible question to answer with total confidence, but I have suggested the following four concepts as guidelines. Once one has identified the groups and individuals that do participate, the next question is: who else should be encouraged to participate, for what reasons, and how?

(1) Participants should include all those with an interest in the issue. Normally, of course, those who are interested will be precisely the ones who will participate. Some may not, however, either because they don't know how to (they don't know where to go or whom to turn to) or they have been rebuffed in previous efforts to participate--or feel they have been rebuffed. Opportunities for participation need to be presented in the clearest terms possible, and people need honest assurance that they will be listened to and not rebuffed again.

(2) Participants should include all those with a stake in the outcome. Again, those with a stake will normally be interested, and the comments in the preceding paragraph will apply here, too. In addition, and especially as issues grow increasingly complex, many people with a stake in an issue will not realize that they have such a stake. This may call for attention to spelling out, in concrete, specific terms, the various possible consequences of the issue in question.

(3) Those with relevant information ought to be among the participants. People with information (frequently specialists) may be unaware of needs for their information or of opportunities to share it with others. Sources of information will often have to be brought in from outside the local community; but, at the same time, it is frequently easy to overlook informed sources within the locality.

(4) Finally, the participants should include those with official responsibility for decision-making about the issue in question. When they don't participate, it is generally because they have good reasons for wanting to avoid the responsibility. Securing their participation may be one of the main items on the agenda for those who are participating.

(B) Structures

Once the participants are identified (and appropriate others encouraged to join them), it may be useful to consider the decision-making structure prevailing among the participants. The following diagram summarizes the major types of structures identified in the research and theoretical literature.

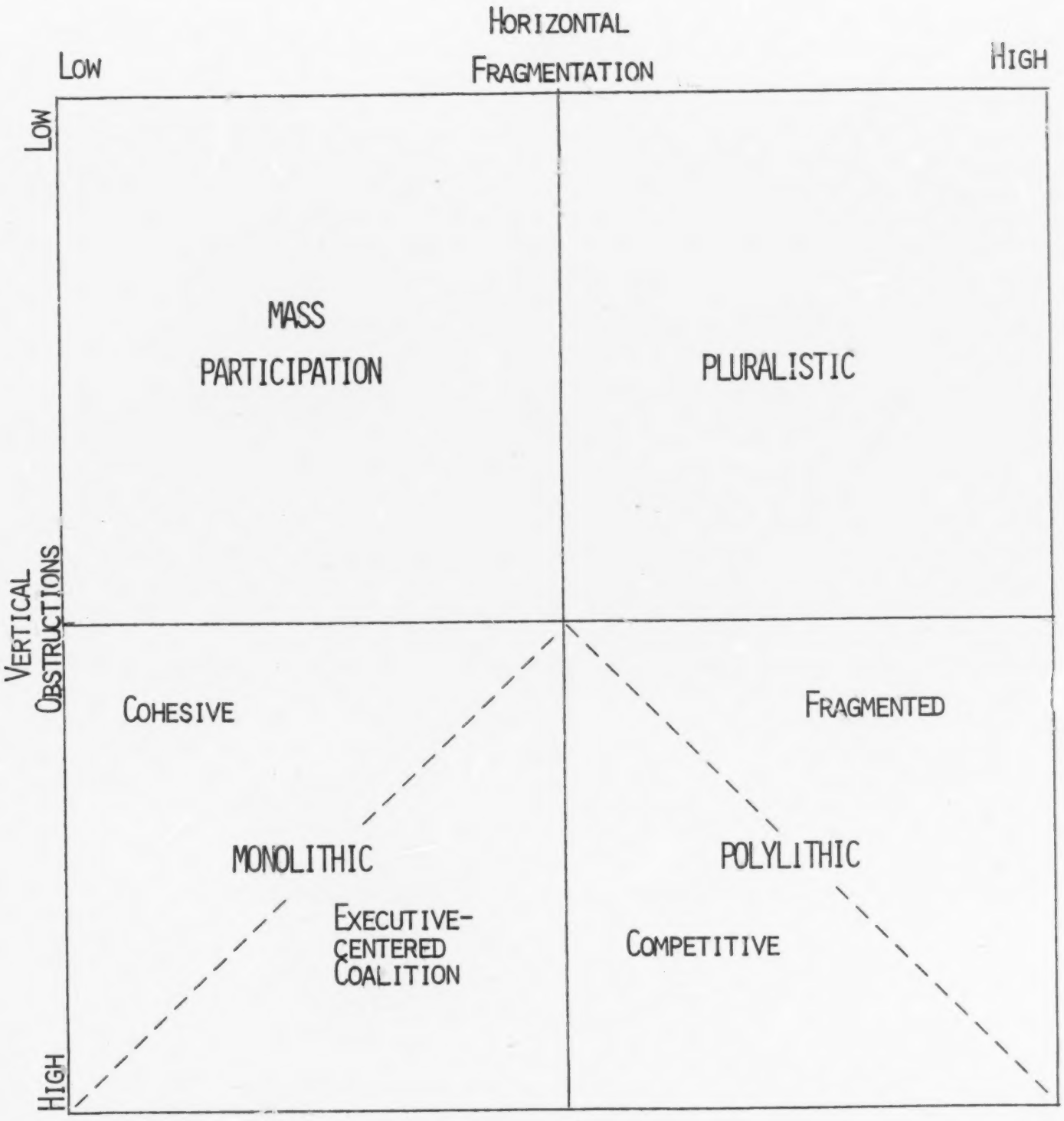
Mass participation structures are those in which both vertical and horizontal barriers within the community are low. They are exemplified by the old New England town meetings. It is doubtful that very many mass participation structures exist today (and their existence may have been overstated even in the past).

As a community grows, and vertical obstructions develop, monolithic structures emerge--that is, structures dominated by one man or a small group who are influential in almost all the community's issue-areas. Further growth and complexity produces horizontal fragmentation, and the result is the emergence of polylithic structures, in which additional powerful groups emerge--sometimes competing with the first group, sometimes specializing in such a way that decisions in certain issue-areas are made by one powerful group while those in other areas are made by other groups.

The pluralistic structures, like the mass participation ones, are probably more ideal than reality. In such structures, there would not only be different groups specializing and competing with one another in decision-making, but there would also be much more participation and involvement by lower-status people. In other words, vertical obstructions would be lowered.

Finally, since monolithic and polylithic structures are the most common, they are further subdivided into cohesive, executive-centered, competitive, and fragmented structures. Cohesive structures are tightly controlled by one or a few men: executive-centered ones are more loosely structured, but one man has enough influence to hold together a single coalition sufficient for making decisions. Competitive structures have at least two independent, competing decision-making groups, while fragmented communities have so many competing and conflicting groups that agreement sufficient for effective decision-making is practically impossible.

COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES



(C) Processes

Finally, as in the following figure, we can specify the stages through which a typical decision-making process moves. Knowing at which stage a given decision is can be helpful in determining what needs to be done next and what kind of assistance may be needed.

At Stage 1, a group becomes interested, generally through a realization that "something is wrong." Very few decision-making processes originating within a community begin with a desire to move toward some goal; rather, they begin with a desire to move away from a situation perceived as unpleasant. At Stage 2, several groups come together, having recognized that they share the same or similar interests.

In Stage 3, the more or less vague feelings that "something is wrong" have to be "translated" into positive proposals or alternatives. This is often difficult. As a matter of fact, the decision-making process can break down here or at any stage; it can also shift backwards to earlier stages, or skip stages, or collapse two or more stages into one.

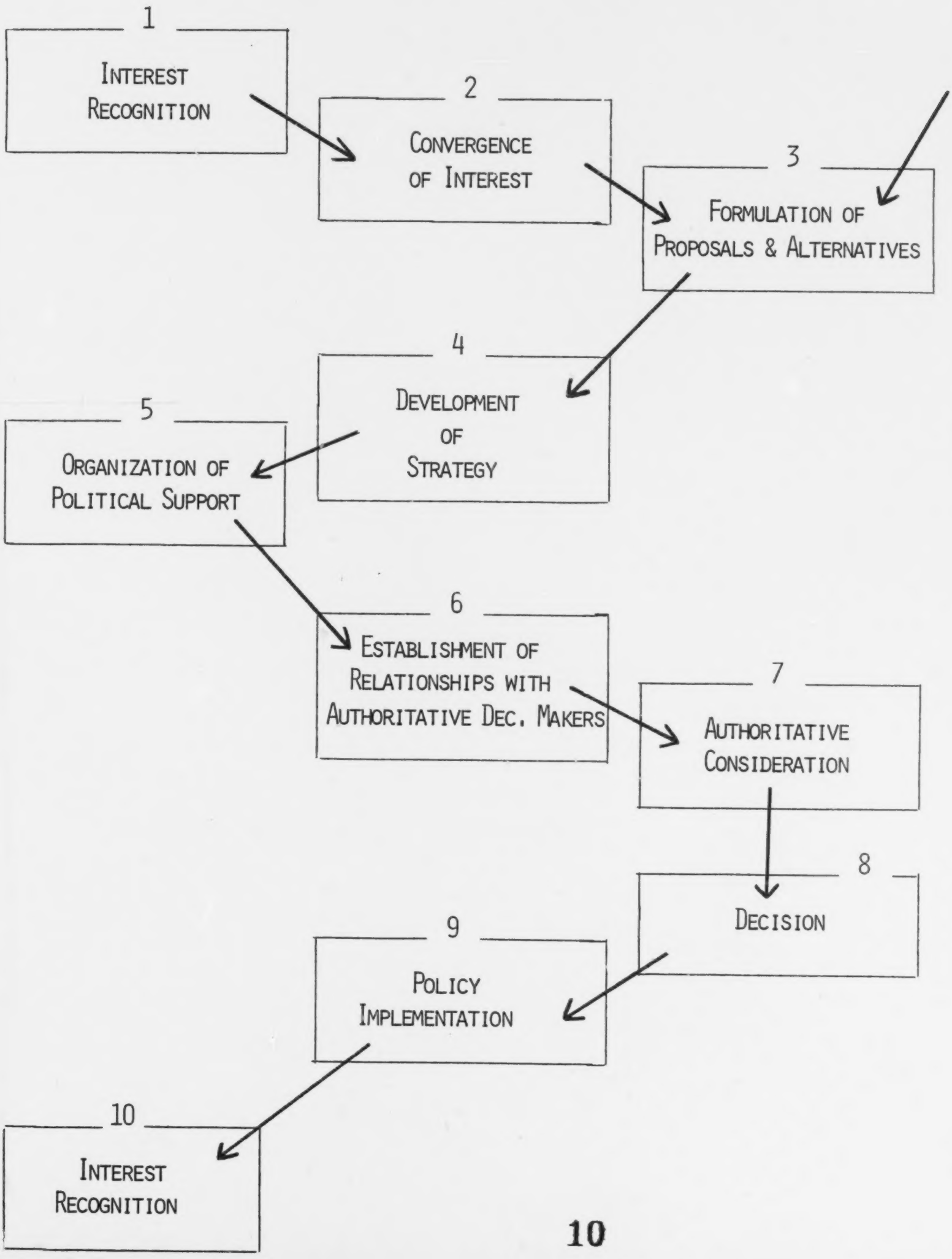
Once the proposals are formulated, the group will turn its attention to the development of a strategy for getting its proposals adopted (Stage 4). In Stage 5, political support in terms of numbers, money, prestige, and other resources will have to be obtained. Once a position of influence is thereby attained, relationships must be established with the authoritative decision-makers--that is, those ultimately responsible for making the necessary decisions.

By this time, the group that started the whole process, and its activities, are likely to be increasingly visible to the rest of the community. If there is serious opposition in other parts of the community, they will also have been formulating counter-proposals, developing strategies, organizing their own political support, and establishing their own relationships with the authoritative decision-makers.

Stage 7 is simply the stage in which the authoritative decision-makers debate and deliberate among themselves. Stage 8 is the decision itself. In Stage 9, the decision is implemented; what is important here is that the decision will have differential impacts on the group that started the process, on its opposition, and on the rest of the community; it is likely that some groups will be helped, some left indifferent, and others hurt.

In Stage 10, the first stage (interest recognition) is repeated. The group that initiated the process may still be dissatisfied or, what is maybe even more likely, some other group is now dissatisfied; in either case, the decision-making process can start all over again.

COMMUNITY DECESION-MAKING PROCESSES



Finally, as the arrow in the upper righthand corner of the diagram indicates, many local decision-making issues (perhaps a majority of them) originate outside the locality. New state regulations, new programs offering financial assistance to localities, decisions by corporate headquarters to expand a local plant or lay off large numbers of employees are just a few samples. These decisions, in effect, enter the local community at Stage 3; the proposals and alternatives are already formulated by the outside forces, and the remaining stages merely determine how the community will respond. This is often the only choice open to local communities; and problems are often complicated when the proposals or alternatives developed externally are incompatible with interests recognized and felt by the local population.

Applying the Framework

This framework--participants, structures, processes--can be applied to any community problem or issue-area. Part I of the attached questionnaire is designed to assist in the application of the framework to specific issues. Part II is designed to help draw some conclusions from an overall analysis, using several copies of Part I, of several issue-areas in the same community.

COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING WORKSHOPS

Study Period Assignment

Part I

Name of community _____ Issue _____

A. PARTICIPANTS

LIST THE PARTICIPANTS IN THIS ISSUE. Some of the participants will be individuals; others may be groups--boards, commissions, etc.

WHAT OTHER GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CAN YOU IDENTIFY WHO MAY HAVE A STAKE OR INTEREST IN THIS ISSUE, BUT ARE NOT REPRESENTED (so far as you can tell) AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS?

WHAT OTHER GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CAN YOU IDENTIFY WHO MAY HAVE VALUABLE INFORMATION OR OFFICIAL RESPONSIBILITY REGARDING THE ISSUE, BUT ARE NOT REPRESENTED AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS?

B. STRUCTURES

WHAT TYPE OF DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURE IS REVEALED IN THE CONSIDERATION OF THIS ISSUE? Check one:

_____ Mass participation

_____ Monolithic: cohesive

_____ Monolithic: executive-centered coalition

_____ Polylithic: competitive

_____ Polylithic: fragmented

_____ Pluralistic

ON WHAT EVIDENCE DO YOU BASE YOUR JUDGMENT?

C. PROCESSES

TRY TO FIT THE EVENTS REGARDING THIS ISSUE DURING THE STUDY PERIOD INTO THE LIST OF STAGES IN TYPICAL COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES.

Stage	Event(s)
(1) Interest Recognition	
(2) Convergence of Interest	
(3) Formulation of Policy Proposals and Alternatives	
(4) Development of Strategy	
(5) Organization of Political Support	
(6) Establishment of Relationships with the Authoritative Decision-Makers	
(7) Authoritative Consideration	

(8) Decision

(9) Policy
Implementation

(10) Interest
Recognition

D. SUMMARY

HOW "EFFECTIVE" DOES THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS REGARDING THIS ISSUE APPEAR TO BE IN TERMS OF RESPONSIVENESS AND THE ABILITY TO ACT? Comment.

COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING WORKSHOPS

Study Period Assignment

Part II

Name of community _____ Summary for all issues

CONSIDERING THE VARIOUS ISSUES YOU HAVE OBSERVED AND ANY OTHER KNOWLEDGE YOU HAVE: LIST THE PROBLEMS, OR BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING, THAT YOU CAN IDENTIFY IN THIS COMMUNITY.

WHAT COULD YOUR ORGANIZATION DO TO HELP IMPROVE DECISION-MAKING IN THIS COMMUNITY?

ERIC Clearinghouse
OCT 7 1971
on Adult Education